

STATE OFFICE PROMOTES BUILDING POWER LINES

By The Gazette State Bureau

HELENA - The Schweitzer administration has some new foot soldiers in its push to develop energy in Montana, in a new office promoting power lines and other energy infrastructure.

With little fanfare, the administration put \$330,000 into the state budget bill this spring to create the Energy Infrastructure Promotion and Development Division.

The division opened its doors late this summer, with three employees and a half-time administrator.

"We thought we needed more people plugging away at this," says Evan Barrett, the state's chief economic development officer. "It's more people, more talent to cover the bases on all the work that has to be done."

Division Administrator Marty Tuttle says its top priority is helping coordinate efforts to build the 215-mile Montana Alberta Tie Line, a power line between Great Falls and Lethbridge, Alberta.

"We've got tons of wind power waiting to come in on the heels of that line," Tuttle says.

The proposed line has undergone environmental review by the state and faces another level of review from federal officials.

The division's employees include Tom Kaiserski, who previously worked on energy issues in Barrett's office, and Chantel McCormick, a former consultant who's worked on energy issues and Democratic political campaigns.

The division is partially the result of efforts by Rep. Alan Olson, R-Roundup, who for several years has backed a state transmission authority that could help finance or coordinate the construction of power lines to encourage new electric power plants in Montana.

Gov. Brian Schweitzer opposed such an authority, saying he doesn't want the state to help finance power lines serving private industry. Yet Barrett says he worked with Olson on the idea of putting money into the budget for the new division, which could help accomplish the same goals.

Barrett says the division provides more people to work with the multiple agencies that deal with power lines, pipelines and other infrastructure needs to export energy that could be generated in Montana.

"There is a huge amount of work, and our limited staff (in the economic development office) couldn't do it all," he says. "We've just got to keep pushing and pushing and move this stuff forward, to open the door to energy development."